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SHILLUK NOTES

By the Rev. D. S. Oyler

SOME CEREMONIES CONNECTED WITH ELECTRIC STORMS

821 THE wonderful natural display in an electric storm is terrifying to the Shilluk. He fears not only the vivid flash, which may send his dwelling up in flames, and may even strike him dead, but he also dreads the terrific crash which accompanies the flash. Such natural forces must be appeased by forms and ceremonies. If it is possible he will not be abroad during such a disturbance of nature. He prefers to crouch in his little hut, where the gleam of the lightning does not penetrate, but where he can hear the terrifying crash.

Once when caught in a rain storm with two native boys, a blinding flash of lightning (lóɟ kpt, club of the rain) was followed by a terrific crash of thunder (mai elóɟo, heaven strikes). The boys came to their knees for an instant, and then were up and hurrying toward shelter. They had kneeled to the lightning, which, according to their custom, was the proper thing to do. Natives when caught in a storm make haste to reach a house. When that is impossible they must take measures to protect themselves from the storm. Any decorations he happens to be wearing, such as bracelets, beads or necklaces, should be smeared with mud. They think the lightning desires an honourable sacrifice when it strikes a person, hence the effort to appear poor and unworthy of the notice of the lightning. At such a time they carry their spears with the handle resting on the shoulder, and the tip pointing upward.

Natives in a house must observe certain formalities during a storm. It is dangerous to sit in front of the door, and so the inmates shrink to the sides of the house. They prefer to sit on the right side of the door, but if more people have taken refuge in the house than can sit on the right side, some of them will sit on the left side, but in any case a wide aisle must be left from the door clear back to the wall opposite the door. All ordinary work must be laid aside during the storm. If a man is smoking he must put his pipe away. Should a woman be pounding grain in a mortar she must tie a bit of dome palm leaf to her pestle and put it away. When

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the storm is very severe an offering must also be made. A bow must be placed in front of the door. If no bow is in the house then a fish spear, or something else made from iron, may be used instead. When a bow or spear is thus offered it is taken back to the ordinary uses after the storm. In case they can find nothing of iron to offer, one of the inmates of the house takes a handful of dura and kneels in front of the door. He then turns back the door mat, and, reaching out, he casts the grain upward into the air.

Sometimes the lightning strikes (mal ago, heaven hits). In former times when a house was struck by lightning each house in the circle had a rope tied around the apex of the cone-shaped roof. A bit of skin from the sacrificed sheep was supposed to be tied to each house. Then the houses were all connected by ropes running to these ropes. I have seen this arrangement only once. To the rope at the apex of the house old bones and snail shells are often tied. They are afraid to move the walls of the house that has been struck, and so the walls are pushed inward. If someone has been killed in the house the walls form a sort of earth covering, as he is not buried as other men. The customs in regard to electrical disturbances are changing. Many of the rites now practised are borrowed for the Dinkas, but seem to be well established at the present time.

According to the present usage, when a house is struck, the owner usually calls a servant of Deit (Bith Deit). After the servant of Deit arrives he surveys the place and then exclaims, "Deit says bring an ox." If the people are poor he may demand a sheep only. He usually adds, "I do not ask for this offering, but Deit asks for it." The offering is then brought, it is killed, cooked and eaten in the same place. After the meat has been eaten the bones are carefully collected, and a large branch from a ligig tree is stuck up on the site of the house. Then the bones of the sacrifice, with its horns and tail, are hung on this branch. Each guest partaking of the feast is supposed to offer an iron bracelet, and these bracelets are also hung on the ligig branch.

A person who has had a narrow escape from death by lightning may become a servant of Deit (Bith Deit), if he so desires. When they travel they say, "Deit asks for this," and few people will refuse them when they beg in that way. In one case a person who dreamed he had been struck by lightning became a servant of Deit.

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When someone has been stunned by lightning, the proper treatment is for two men to take the patient by the heels and, with his head hanging down, to dip his head in water. He is then taken from the water, but continues to hang head downward. After he has been held in this position for some time, snails and frogs will pour out of his mouth, and he will then be restored to health. One man assured me that he had once seen the frogs and snails come from a patient. 752 821

When a person is killed by lightning he is not buried as other men. If his death occurs in a house the walls are pushed down over him, and form his grave. If he is killed out in the open, each person in the village is supposed to bring a bit of earth and throw on him, and thus the grave is formed. It is thought that anyone who refuses to do that will be struck by lightning. 744 821

The person who is killed by lightning is not mourned as other people. The ox that is killed immediately after his death is looked upon as an offering to Deñ rather than as a sacrifice for the dead. The relatives are not to weep for them as they do for those taken by disease. The thought seems to be that the man who is struck by lightning is called by Deñ, and that it is an honour to be called by Deñ, and that weeping and lamenting over such a death would be dishonouring to Deñ. Death by lightning is looked upon as bad, but not as bad as death that comes through disease. The family of the deceased is supposed to be prospered. They feel that the family has made an offering to the higher powers, and they in turn should be blessed by the higher powers for the offering they have made. [743] 745 821

When a house is struck by lightning the war cry is given. The men all run to the river with the tips of their spears pointing upward. The spears are waved in imitation of the lightning. This is done so that Deñ will fear and return to the upper regions. Then they run to the boat landing where they throw their spears on the ground. Then each man cuts a bit of green grass. He carries this grass to the fire and throws it on the blaze. Occasionally, instead of running to the river in that manner, they run to the fire with their hands raised as if in supplication, and they give the war cry as they run. 787 821

A day or two after the fire, as soon as the walls are cooled, the people assemble. If no one has been killed in the house, a sheep is killed and cooked and beer is made. After the sheep is cooked, bits are cut from 792 783 821

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the liver, stomach, heart, tongue, upper lip, lower lip, and lungs. The walls of the house are then pushed down, and these bits are cast on the mound. They are to be thrown by a servant of Deit. The soup in which the meat was cooked is taken by the chief servant of Deit present, and the next in rank takes a gourd of beer, and they pour these upon the mound at the same time that the meat is thrown on it. The people then dance, while they sing a song of Deit. While the servants of Deit put the highest branch (*ŋk Deit*) in place, the rest of the people run to the river to take a bath.

At the close of the rainy season the family of the person who has been struck by lightning invite the people of the village to drink beer. One gourd full of the beer is thrown into the air for Deit. This observance often becomes an annual event in the family. They think it helps to keep the lightning away.

A house is never built on the exact location of a house that has been struck by lightning, though another may be built near the place. An object that has been struck by lightning is sometimes worshipped. Sacrifices may be killed and eaten in front of it.

Many of these ceremonies are borrowed from the Dinkas. Deit is worshipped by the Dinkas; they are "Deit's people." He is the spirit of the rain, or the rain.

The rains at the beginning and close of the rainy season are very often accompanied by considerable electrical displays. It is small wonder that the natives behold in amazed terror the wonderful power of nature, and it is still less cause to marvel that they try to placate the powers of the storm. The westerner, with his scientific knowledge of electricity, is often awed by the gleam of the lightning and the crash of thunder, and it is not surprising that the uneducated native is even more awed by it.

Rites connected with the Dance Initiation.

The Shilluk lad looks forward with eagerness to the time when he will be permitted to join in the dances of his people. Not only does he long for the time because of the social pleasure, as dancing is the chief amusement of the people, but the right to dance carries with it other privileges.

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Many things are denied to the young man who has not been properly initiated. He cannot take part in the formal dances, though he may join in the moonlight dances of the children. He is debarred from that pursuit so dear to the heart of the small boy, that is, he is not permitted to go to their tribal fights. However, he enjoys immunity from danger in these fights, as women and boys who have not danced are placed in the same class; it is a disgrace to kill them. In the few cases that I have known of small lads being killed, the ones who did the killing insisted that it was a mistake—that either the weapon had miscarried or they had mistaken the lad for someone else. Some timid lads may delay their initiation through fear, but to the majority it is a challenge to claim the full rights of men. The boy who has not danced is not permitted to wear the large necklaces made from the heavy hairs of the giraffe tail. He may wear a band of a few hairs, but the large ones called *wiu* are forbidden to him. He is also forbidden to wear the *reh*, the beads made from the eggshell of the ostrich. He is not permitted to use "*ajôto*" on his hair. This is a brick-like substance made by taking the cleaning from the floor of the stable in the morning, and then dried cow dung is put with it, and the resulting mixture is made into a loaf and burned with cow dung. It has a brick-like appearance when finished. It is then powdered. The young man puts oil on his head. The dust is poured on his head, and he keeps shaking his head to get it to form little balls. Other *red* preparations for the head may be used by the small boys. The lad who has not danced is not permitted to wear the skins of the various members of the cat tribe that the men wear at fights and dances. Finally, he is not permitted to make a formal call on the young ladies until after he has danced, and he is not granted any political rights in the village council.

The ages at the time of initiation vary. A strong lad is initiated at an earlier age than a weakling. The older men say that boys dance at an earlier age than they did formerly. The average age now is perhaps fifteen years. Some of the older men say it used to be at least twenty years. When all the older males in a family are dead a boy may be initiated younger so that he can inherit the property of his father, and also to give the family representation in the civic life of the village. Initiations may occur at both the spring and autumn dances. Those initiated the same year have a feeling of relationship for others of the same

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56 class. In the fights the last class to be initiated is placed in the rear, and the other men endeavour to protect them. The older men fear 101 that if these lads, who are still novices, should be wounded they might 104 cry out in their suffering and weaken the hearts of the older fighting men.

88 When a young man feels that he is old enough to dance, he usually goes to his father or guardian and asks permission. If the father gives his consent, the lad gets the ostrich eggshell beads (rek) and the dancing skin (okwar). He may also get the giraffe tail necklace (win). Then when a dance occurs in some near-by village he adorns himself with all the ornaments that he can get. The skin and the beads must be tied on him with ceremony the first time. The lad selects a man who is popular with the ladies in the mixed dances, and asks him to tie them on him. The man who performs the ceremony takes a string of the ostrich beads and places them about the waist of the lad, as though he expected to tie the rek in place. He then lets it drop almost to the ground, and then brings it again to the waist of the lad. Three times he acts as though he would tie it, and then lets it down again. Then the fourth time he actually ties the string. The skin is tied in the same way. After the skin and beads have been tied once, the young man may tie them for himself on later occasions.

593 Sometimes the parental permission is not given for the son to dance. 88 The father feels that he is too young to dance. He says, "You are too small and weak, and in a bottle you would be killed." Sometimes the son heeds the advice of his father, and waits until he is older and is able to dance with the consent of his father. Other young fellows are more determined, and such a one goes to some man to get him to tie his skin and beads. He usually goes to a man of some other village, because the men of his own village would not care to offend his father. The man usually asks the young man if his father consents, and the son says that he does not. He goes from one to another till he finds a man who will act for him. The ceremony is binding in spite of the father's objections, and the young man cannot be released from his responsibilities. When a boy has danced in defiance to the wishes of his father he does not feel so brave after the period of dancing is over, and he asks someone to go with him to "soften his father." The intercessor kneels before the father with the boy behind him, and he says, "The boy went to a dance. You refused.

but he grasped it. He asked me to come and see if you are displeased. 593
I have brought him, I give him to you. He is not the only one who 881
has done such a thing, for even of old our boys have so done." If the father says, "I refused because he was small, but I am not angry," the affair is settled, and the boy returns to his home. If the father is angry, and refuses to be reconciled the boy goes home with his friend. The friend then undertakes to make a reconciliation. He gives the father a present, which is usually a sheep or a spear. If the present is refused he will send other and greater presents until the father accepts, and the acceptance implies that the son has been forgiven.

Young men who are initiated to the dance the same year usually 561
have a kindred feeling for each other. When the village goes forth to battle, the ones initiated last and the old men are supposed to be in the rear, so that they will be protected by the stronger fighting men. In a fight, men who have been initiated the same year usually keep together, though that is not always the case. When a feud begins between two villages there are men in each faction who were initiated the same year. While the men go forth by villages, yet their fights are broken up [726]
into a number of personal combats. Many men refuse to contend against men who were initiated in their class, and when they find themselves near such men, they move on to seek different foes. On the other hand, others seek to engage men of their own class. Perhaps they follow the analogy of a family, for the most bitter fighting occurs when a family is divided.

After the young man is prepared for the dance he joins the young 535
men of his village who are going to the dance, though he must keep in 881
the rear. In the dances the men go through a regular form, which is largely military in nature. The novice takes part in all of these movements though he must keep to the rear. Then the mixed dances begin, and then comes the real test for the young man. In the mixed dances the woman asks the man to be her partner. Happy indeed is the young man who is asked by some woman at his first dance. He says of the first woman who asks him to dance, "She cut my cloth (kâk lenî)." In that he refers to the skin he wears. The woman who asks him to dance cannot be a relative, nor may she be a married woman, though a girl who is engaged may ask him to dance. It is preferred that the girl asking him to dance should belong to a different sub-tribe (kwâ). 882

After a boy has danced for a year or two, he may dance with a married woman who has no children. After another lapse of time he is eligible to dance with the mother of one child, and so on until he is eligible to dance with any woman. A man never dances with his own wife. Often the girl who first dances with a boy is in love with him, and sometimes they later get married. Such marriages are usually happy. If a young man is not asked by a girl to dance with her within two or three years of his initiation, it is not likely that any girl will ask him to dance with her, as the other girls would ridicule her for dancing with an unpopular man. Such a man usually experiences difficulty in getting a wife, as no woman wants to marry a man who is unpopular with the women. The mother of the young man who has been asked to dance prepares a feast for the girl who asked him to dance, and sometimes the girl prepares a return feast for the young man and some of his friends. Many an old man speaks with great respect of the girl who first asked him to dance. When a man is dancing with a woman he calls her ɔ̀ɡì "my wife."

If a boy makes unseemly haste to call on the young ladies after his initiation, his father is angry, and says, "Is your reason for dancing to get the right to call on the women?"

After a boy has danced he takes a second name. He may choose his own name, often from something he has done, or from a cow he has bought. If he cannot think of a suitable name he may ask his friends for suggestions. In some cases an older man may go to him and say, "Do you have a name?" If he replies in the negative, the man may make a suggestion. The boy does not announce his name to his parents. They may hear his young friends call him by his new name, and they ask, "Is that his name now?"

If a man dies leaving only a small son who has not danced, they say, "His property is on the ground (yùnɛ̀ yà ɲìlì). Later when the boy has danced, they say his property has been inherited (ɔ̀lùdì).

People who are of the same age are called (ɲɔ̀k ayɛ̀l). They are expected to help each other.

The girls may dance when they are very small, but they must wear a sheep-skin. Later, when the girl is larger, and her breasts begin to develop (ɲìnɛ̀ ɛ̀tɛ̀), she wears a calf-skin, which is supplied her by her father. If she has no father or close male relative to get her a calf-skin, she will wear the sheep-skin until she is married, and then her husband

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will get her a calf-skin. The mother of the girl is supposed to tie the calf-skin the first time the girl wears it to a dance. If her mother is dead, then a woman the same age as her mother ties it for her.

Some Begging Customs of the Women.

The Shilluk women seem to derive much pleasure from begging for cattle from some of the richer men of the tribe. The occasion is made a holiday for the women of the village, and they go forth in their finest clothes. If the recipient of their honour lives at some distance, the start is made early in the morning, and all the women of the village go. If there are too many women in the village, then the women of a certain age go. The women of two different villages will not unite to go on these expeditions. The proper season for these begging dances is just before the rains begin, though they may be held any time during the dry season.

The women decide upon the man to be honoured by their party before they start. Occasionally, they honour a man from their own village, but in that case they only ask for a sheep. Often they go five or six miles, and sometimes they go as far as fifteen or twenty miles. While they are gone the men must stay at home to care for the babies. Often, on such occasions, a mother will leave a tiny baby at home for the whole day. Usually, they object to leaving their babies at home, but for this event it is different.

The man to be honoured is not warned, lest he hide from them. Should the man they are seeking be absent from the village, the woman hang a string of beads made from the shell of the ostrich egg (rok) in the enclosure between his two houses. When he returns, he says, "Who brought this rok?" His wife replies, "The women brought it." He asks, "What do they want?" His wife replies, "An ox." His wife says "They will return." He says, "They will find nothing." His wife replies, "So many should love something, I love children, so many women should not be coloured by red lips." When the women return they usually get the ox.

Before the women start on such a trip they choose a leader, unless they already have she. She is called a lyda. She has the powers of a magistrate. If any trouble occurs among the women, she acts as judge. She is crowned with the rok, as the chief of the village is crowned. In

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future expeditions of the same party she will be chief. In the village she has the right to judge cases that are strictly between women.

A man may refuse to give an ox, making the excuse that he has nothing to give. Then the women will mutter, saying, "He kills us by making us stand in the hot sun." They seem to think he is cheating them. The man's wife may intercede on their behalf. She will put on her husband's cloth, put a rek about her neck, anoints her body with oil, and then takes the chief's spear, and dances among the women. For such a display the chief will usually relent, and tell his young men to bring out the ox. He may be very churlish, and refuse to give them what they desire. They depart, muttering curses on him and his family. If in a short time sickness should occur in his family it is attributed to the ill-will of these women. He sends a messenger to call them. They come and get the ox. He then tells them of the sickness in his family, and the women order ashes to be brought. The women fill their hands with the ashes. They then pray after this manner, "You are God. We were refused an ox by this chief. He now has sickness. We are no longer angry at him. Permit him to escape." Next they spit on the ashes they hold in their hands, and then sprinkle them all over the members of his household. The women then depart, and the patient recovers.

When the women go to a chief and he gives them an ox, they sprinkle ashes about his house as a blessing. The ox is taken to their village, and it may be killed immediately, though it is more likely to be kept for a time. When the animal is killed the brisket is given to the old men of the village. The old women take the rump, and the younger women divide the remainder of the meat.

A man is glad to have the women come to beg from him, even when he refuses to give them what they desire. It is a great compliment to have the women come, as it shows that his fame has spread abroad as a rich and generous man. Then, too, the ceremony is such as to feed the vanity of the man singled out for the honour. The women usually rush up to the house shouting and singing his praises. They sing songs about his bravery, and tell of his virtues, but the chorus of their song usually is, "Brother, hand out that ox."

After a chief has given an ox, the women go away saying that he is a fine man, and a great chief. The women seem to demand a great deal. Once in a case observed, the ox was given. The women did not watch

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the animal carfully, and he made his escape, and ran away. It was too much trouble for them to catch the animal, and so they went back to the old chief and demanded that he give them another animal in exchange for the one that had escaped. The new animal was given to them, and they departed.

Once some women went to dance before a chief, who was away from home. One of his followers, anxious to save the property of his master, took a whip made of hippopotamus hide, and used it freely on the women. They retreated to a considerable distance, and sat down to discuss the matter. At that time the chief returned, and he was distressed when he heard what his follower had done. He made peace with the women, and give them the ox.

Visitors from other villages are not supposed to go on these trips, nor are they allowed to eat of the meat when the animal is killed. When a woman is married and goes to the village of her husband, she is not allowed to go on these begging trips until after she has lived there a full year. The woman might consent, but her husband would be angry, as it might lead to her being led astray. She does not have the right to return to her old home and go with her old friends on their begging expeditions. Women in the advanced stages of pregnancy are not permitted to go on these trips.

These dances are a great diversion for the women. They are looked upon as memorable occasions. The chief visited may not be in a financial position to afford to give the ox, and yet he gets full value for the animal in the prestige it gives him.

The women have another begging custom that is suggestive of Ruth. When a man finishes his grain he calls in the young men, who beat it out with flails. The women of the man's family winnow the grain. Often the man does not have enough women-folk to do all the work, and other women are called in to help. The helpers get all the grain that is left in the chaff as their portion.

Many women come to beg from the owner of the threshing floor. They do not speak to the owner of the floor, but they make a general statement that they have come to beg. They sit in silence, and watch the progress of the work. They do not ask for grain, but each woman keeps her guard in a prominent position. When the threshing is finished, the owner of the field fills a basket with grain, and from that basket he

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735 24 fills the gourds belonging to the women. If the basket is not sufficient to fill all the gourds, and if the man is of a good disposition, he brings out enough more grain to fill them all. If the man is churlish he will say, "I have given you enough" and will refuse to give them any more than the one basket full. Sometimes a man will say, "Why do you make sport of me by coming here to beg? See, my grain is very little indeed." That is the line the man takes when he refuses altogether to give grain to the women.

If the women are pleased with the amount of grain that has been 783 735 24 given them, they will bless the owner of the threshing floor. Each woman takes a few grains of the grain that has been given her, and sprinkles it on the threshing floor. As she sprinkles the grain she says, "I return you yours, I eat, and am satisfied." After such a blessing his crop the next year should be very abundant. Often the recipient will say, "I am a woman belonging to God. I am happy, because you have given to me, now I bless you."

It is an honour to have the women come to a man's floor to beg, as 426 559 it implies that he is a rich man, and can supply them. However, it is often a hardship, and many of them can ill afford the grain they give away to the women. One man said that one year all the grain he raised was given to the women who begged from him, and the only way he got food for his family was by his wife's going out to other threshing floors, and begging from the owners of the floors. It is not unusual for a woman to go to a village at some distance and beg from all the men in the village. She may return with ten or more baskets of grain. Sometimes she is refused the grain that she seeks. The man who refuses to give from his [624] threshing floor is considered a very mean man, and to make a good showing, they give more than they can afford.

Men sometimes go to the threshing floors to beg, but in that case the procedure is different. The man who begs gets a basket and, unbidden, helps carry the grain to the village. At the end of the threshing the owner is supposed to give him a basket of grain, but often he is given less than that. Both sides profit. The beggars have a picnic, and the man from whom they beg is highly honoured.